

Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee Inquiry into definitions of meat and other animal products

About this submission

The George Institute for Global Health is pleased to contribute to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee's inquiry into the definitions of meat and other animal products.

We welcome the opportunity to further engage with the Committee on this important issue.

About The George Institute for Global Health

The George Institute is a leading independent global medical research institute established and headquartered in Sydney. It has major centres in China, India and the United Kingdom, and an international network of experts and collaborators. Our mission is to improve the health of millions of people worldwide by using innovative approaches to prevent and treat the world's biggest killers: non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and injury.

Our work aims to generate effective, evidence-based and affordable solutions to the world's biggest health challenges. We research the chronic and critical conditions that cause the greatest loss of life and quality of life, and the most substantial economic burden, particularly in resource-poor settings.

Our food policy team works in Australia and overseas to reduce death and disease caused by diets high in salt, harmful fats, added sugars and excess energy. The team conducts multi-disciplinary research with a focus on generating outputs that will help government and industry deliver a healthier food environment for all.

The George Institutes also owns and manages FoodSwitch, a mobile app that empowers consumers to make better food choices by providing simple nutrition information on a scanned product and suggesting healthier alternatives to 'switch' to. FoodSwitch also collects nutrition information data from annual in-store supermarket visits and through crowd-sourcing images of new products through consumers who use the app. In turn, FoodSwitch is used to help our research and advocacy work to improve food environments.

Acknowledgement of Country

The George Institute acknowledges the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation as the Traditional Custodians of the land on which our Australia office is built and this submission was written. We pay our respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

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1a. The potential impairment of Australian meat category brand investment from the appropriation of product labelling by manufactured plant-based or synthetic protein brands, including:

- i. the use of manufactured plant-based or synthetic protein descriptors containing reference to animal flesh or products made predominately from animal flesh, including but not limited to “meat”, “beef”, “lamb”, and “goat”; and
- ii. the use of livestock images on manufactured plant-based or synthetic protein packaging or marketing materials.

Meat intakes have been [decreasing](#) in Australia over recent decades. This has occurred in parallel with a shift towards more sustainable diets, with nearly 2.5 million Australians now consuming a [vegetarian](#) or vegan diet. The consumer demand for meat alternatives is also growing in Australia, with sales of manufactured plant-based or synthetic protein products rising by [46%](#) between 2019-20. The number of manufactured plant-based or synthetic protein products available on supermarket shelves has also doubled during this period.

The George Institute believes there is a need for more research to better understand the impact and prevalence of product labelling by manufactured plant-based or synthetic protein brands on sales of meat products. It is possible that use of manufactured plant-based or synthetic protein descriptors containing reference to animal flesh and/or use of livestock images could potentially impair Australian meat category brand investment. However, with a lack of evidence in this area, this cannot be confirmed. The George Institute believes there are a range of factors that are likely to have a more significant impact on people choosing to purchase manufactured protein products over meat. These factors include considerations for [health](#), the environment, [weight loss](#), and [ethical concerns](#) such as animal welfare.

In relation to 1.a.i., The George Institute understands that as manufactured plant-based proteins are often designed to emulate the taste of meat products, these descriptors are used as a reference point to help consumers understand the type of flavours they should expect. These descriptions are helpful for consumers who are vegetarian or vegan, or those who are transitioning toward a more plant-based diet as per EAT-Lancet Commission on Food, Planet, Health [recommendations](#). The George Institute supports the continued use of meat-based descriptors for plant-based or synthetic protein products, but recommends the need to improve the regulation regarding use of these meat-based descriptors on manufactured plant-based or synthetic protein products. For example, to avoid opportunities for products to be misleading, The George Institute recommends there should be a requirement that use of meat-based descriptors can only be used if the label also clearly states that it is a meat-free product.

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1b. The health implications of consuming heavily manufactured protein products which are currently being retailed with red meat descriptors or livestock images, including:

- i. consideration of unnatural additives used in the manufacturing process; and
- ii. consideration of chemicals used in the production of these manufactured protein products.

The George Institute [research](#) shows heavily manufactured protein products can be high in sodium, albeit comparable to their animal-sourced processed meat counterparts. These products are also “ultra-processed”, having undergone multiple levels of processing before being sold with addition of additives such as preservatives, artificial flavours and colours. Intakes of ultra-processed foods have been [linked](#) with higher rates of obesity, high blood pressure and heart disease. However, little research has looked at the specific links between manufactured protein products and health outcomes.

The George Institute believes it is important to highlight the health implications of consuming meat products, particularly processed meats such as bacon, sausages, cabanossi and deli meats. Processed meats contribute to approximately [20%](#) of the Australian population’s meat intake. These products do not fall under the Australian Dietary Guidelines’ core food category for meat. Rather, it is advised these products are limited in the diet due to their detrimental health effects. Processed meats are classified as a [Group 1 carcinogen](#) (known to cause cancer) and have been strongly linked to a number of [negative health outcomes](#) including type 2 diabetes, heart disease and some types of cancer. Reducing population intakes of processed meat is important to improve the health of Australians. Although plant-based protein products are heavily manufactured, they are a healthier alternative to processed animal-based protein products in terms of preventing chronic diseases such as cancer, heart disease and type 2 diabetes, and obesity.

Unlike processed meats, natural, unprocessed, unflavoured meats, are considered a core food as part of the [Australian Dietary Guidelines](#). These meat products can provide a strong source of protein in the diet and a range of nutrients such as iron and B12. However, despite some of the positive health effects associated with unprocessed, unflavoured meat, there is a need for most Australians to reduce their meat intake for both personal health and planetary health reasons. As manufactured protein products are often fortified with nutrients naturally found in meat products, including iron, B12 and calcium, these products can help to provide some of the nutritional benefits of meat for those consuming or looking to consume a more [sustainable](#) diet.

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1c. The immediate and long-term social and economic impacts of the appropriation of Australian meat category branding on businesses, livestock producers and individuals across regional, rural and remote Australia, including:

- i. the reliance upon imported ingredients;
- ii. the support of regional employment; and
- iii. the state and commonwealth taxation contribution from the Australian red meat and livestock sector.

The George Institute acknowledges that growing interest in manufactured plant-based or synthetic protein products may have immediate and long-term social and economic impacts on livestock producers and individuals across regional, rural and remote areas. However, considering 75% of beef and veal production and 73% of mutton and lamb production in Australia is [exported](#), it is likely that the rise in manufactured plant-based or synthetic protein products in Australia will not have a major economic impact on these meat categories. Rather, the economic impacts will probably be concentrated on pig and poultry products, where only 5% of the market is [exported](#). Moreover, The George Institute believes that the rise in sales of these products is driven by a range of factors beyond just appropriation of Australian meat category. Other influencing factors are likely to include cost, health, ethics (animal and human rights) and the environment. More work is needed to understand the direct social and economic impacts of branding and labelling of manufactured plant-based or synthetic protein products on the Australian meat category.

As these plant-based products inevitably continue to take over a greater proportion of the market, The George Institute believes there is opportunity for primary industries to respond to the rise in the demand by increasing farming and agriculture practices towards ingredients found in plant-based meat alternatives. This may include, for example, shifting some of the focus on livestock onto vegetables and crops, particularly those found in manufactured plant-based or synthetic protein products like soybean. This would reduce reliance on imported ingredients and support regional employment in agriculture and manufacturing, particularly if these products were manufactured in Australia, rather than overseas.

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1d. The implications for other Australian animal products impaired from the appropriation of product labelling by manufactured plant-based or synthetic proteins

The George Institute understands there are growing numbers of manufactured plant-based or synthetic protein products across the entire food supply, including across food categories such as cheese, milk, mayonnaise, yoghurt, ice-cream and egg-based products. The George Institute acknowledges increased sales of these products could impair sales of animal products. However, as stated 1c, the direct implications from the appropriation of product labelling is not yet well established and it is likely that growth of these products is driven by a range of factors. Moreover, the proportion of the Australian population who identify as vegetarian or vegan is [growing](#). Between 2014 and 2019, there was an 8% increase in the Australia population, from 11.2% in 2014 to 12.1% in 2019. The increased range of available manufactured plant-based or synthetic protein products helps to provide variety and support the nutritional quality of people who are vegetarian and vegan, or those who are trying to reduce their intakes of meat.

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1e. Any related matters

Planetary health

The George Institute believes the impact of meat on planetary health should be considered within this inquiry due to the major contribution of meat consumption to [global warming](#). There is strong interest from consumers, the private sector and government policy makers to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) and associated adverse climate impacts.

In comparison to meat products, manufactured plant-based or synthetic protein products are better for the [planet](#) – requiring less land and water and producing fewer greenhouse gas emissions. The lower environmental impact of these products appears to be partly driving the growing consumer demand and sales. Therefore, The George Institute believes that accounting for the environmental impact of the food supply is an important aspect to consider when developing legislation around these products, or any food products in the food supply.

The George Institute has responded to consumer concerns around the environmental impact of food products by providing a new ‘Planetary Health Rating’ within the FoodSwitch app. The Planetary Health Rating reveals the GHG emissions of different categories of foods and beverages in an easy-to-interpret ‘star rating’ (based on the Health Star Rating System), where products are assigned a rating between 0.5 stars (categories with the highest GHG emissions) to 5 stars (those with the lowest GHG emissions). Given there is growing research development in the area of planetary health, this work will likely further raise awareness about the high GHG emissions of meat products. This could further promote shifts in consumer purchases away from meat products toward manufactured plant-based or synthetic protein products.

Placement of manufactured protein products in the supermarket

The George Institute believes placement of manufactured plant-based or synthetic protein products in the supermarket could also have an impact on the Australian meat category brand investment. Traditionally these products were sold in the chilled and frozen sections of the supermarket, away from meat products and in clearly labelled areas (e.g., vegan/vegetarian). More recently, supermarket retailers have started to display some of these products in the meat section, which may increase interest and demand for these products given the increased visibility amongst consumers who are purchasing meat products. The George Institute recommends considering placement of these products in the retail environment as a factor when setting policies around these products.

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